Chapter 10

Senior Management, Decision Making and Design

Managers are the integrators, they fit the pieces of society together.
-Alvin Toffler

INTRODUCTION

One very important group we have not discussed in detail before is senior management. It is they who take the important company decisions on what to do, how to do it, and what they intend the consequences of their decisions to be. Their role is critical to successful change. It is their definition of business objectives that will shape the change programme, and it is they who will have the final say in how to manage this. Decisions on whether to take a participative approach will depend on their personal values and on whether they believe the democratic involvement of their staff will increase the likelihood of success. This does not mean that they will necessarily be the initiators of participative design. In my experience, this initiative often came from senior members of the systems group who saw it as leading to more successful systems design with a higher level of acceptance. But they always had to give their approval to this approach and ideally some would become part of the project steering group.
The companies I worked with all had senior managers who were willing to involve their staff in design, but they often defined “involvement” in different ways. The Swedish automobile company Volvo redesigned its work structures to make production work more multiskilled and more satisfying for employees, and this decision came initially from the most senior management, although agreement to the approach was sought from everyone in the company. Senior management also approved the approach in the bank and in Rolls Royce, where an excellent and very helpful steering group was formed. Surprisingly the one firm where there were problems was Digital. Digital from its inception was very democratic as this was the personal philosophy of Ken Olsen, its founder. However, it did not succeed in getting senior sales management involved in the XSEL project. The reasons for this were interesting. Although the operational members of the sales force were a very powerful group and enthusiastic about their new role in design, senior sales managers were not a part of the XSEL design process. They had little technical knowledge and did not really understand what was taking place, and their primary interest was always an increase in sales figures. This was especially true of the sales directors, and Bruce strove for a long time to get a senior sales sponsor for the project. When he eventually did so, he found that this individual had little understanding of what was taking place and unrealistically asked for immediate results in a software design process that required a considerable amount of time to complete. This was an example of senior management that never fully understood the nature of the problems that their subordinates were trying to solve.

The IT developments of the nineties brought with them many new decisions and difficulties for senior management, some of which were quite new. This knowledge gap led to many unanticipated consequences of change, and these could easily become risks. A group particularly affected by risk was, of course, senior management itself, who had to protect the firm from the results of what were often earlier errors of judgment. Ulrich Beck (1992), the German sociologist, tells us that we are now living in a risk society. We must be aware of this and able to respond effectively to it.

Another very serious problem for Digital senior sales management was the eventual rejection of the XSEL expert system by the Digital sales force because it was too complex and time-consuming. This meant that the large financial savings that had originally been forecast were never achieved. However this was not a total loss as the company had learned a great deal about the participative design of large systems, and this now became company policy for all major projects.
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